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**The Hillfort at Burhill, Buckland, Gloucestershire: evidence for
occupation during the earliest phases of the iron age**

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THE HILLFORT AT BURHILL, BUCKLAND, GLOUCESTERSHIRE: EVIDENCE FOR OCCUPATION DURING THE EARLIEST PHASES OF THE IRON AGE

Summary

This paper describes an important and unusually well-preserved assemblage of earlier iron age pottery recovered from the surface at the margin of the enclosed area of the univallate hillfort at Burbill (SP 08503630) and briefly discusses the significance of the site within its broader archaeological context.

Introduction

The site is situated at the tip of a pronounced, level-topped spur which forms part of the lower slope of the main Cotswold Scarp (FIG. 5). The interior of the hillfort is at approximately 167 m OD, on Middle Lias, and directly overlooks the Severn/Avon valley, which is formed by Lower Lias clay with overlying gravel patches some 90 m below. The location is an extremely advantageous one for settlement, since it offers a relatively sheltered, well-watered, mid-scarp position at a lower altitude within the local range, maintains the defensive advantages of a terminal location on a spur, and provides equal access both to limestone upland areas above the site and to the valley below; areas of differing and complementary agricultural potential. The entire interior area of the hillfort is under intensive annual cultivation, ploughed to a depth of approximately 0.25 m. Only some 80 m of the rampart remains unploughed, and about 80 per cent of the rest of the spur is under cultivation.

The defences of the hillfort survive only on the north-eastern side as a fragment of univallate rampart about 1.5 m high, 9 m wide, with an external ditch about 7 m wide and 1 m deep in silted condition (FIG 1, #1; RCHM 1976 22–23). Any remaining circuit, which if complete would have enclosed 3–4 hectares, has been removed or severely reduced by repeated ploughing. Additional rampart may be indicated by a very low bank some 0.1–0.2 m high, with no indication on the ground of a surviving ditch, but with an approximately central gap of some 30 m suggesting an entrance (FIG. 5, #2). There is no clear evidence for the rampart extending around the margin of the spur as a complete circuit, the only defences which are apparent are those which cross the spur and continue for a short distance around its northern flank (FIG. 5, #3). The remaining stretch of relatively intact rampart owes its survival entirely to its position among marginal boundary scrub at the scarp edge, where it has not been practical to plough.

The pottery described in this paper was recovered from a dense and localized surface scatter of occupation debris, containing iron age pottery, baked clay and daub fragments, gritstone and quern fragments, fire-cracked pebbles, and fragments of animal bone. It produced nothing which could be directly assigned to a date later than the earliest iron age. The area of the scatter covered approximately 0.5 ha and was located immediately outside the possible entrance (FIG. 5, #5). In view of its good preservation it seems likely that the Burhill sample represents more deeply-stratified material recently brought up from greater depth by changes in ploughing practice. In contrast, pottery previously recorded from the site (Saville 1984, 170) has been considerably abraded. Evidence from other sites, such as the hillfort at Dowdeswell (SO 99901890) and the settlement at Guiting Power (Saville 1979), suggests that such external pits occurred elsewhere on iron age sites in the area.

Finds from the interior of the hillfort at Burbill are infrequent, and a general scatter of occupation debris is absent. Surface finds of iron age sherds from the area of the rampart have been noted in RCHM 1976, 22 and a single fragment, again a surface find from the interior, is illustrated in Saville 1984 (FIG. 3, 25). The latter is a rim fragment with finger-tip/nail impressions along the lip, and is entirely consistent with the early iron age pottery described in this paper. A well-preserved saddle quern of prehistoric type has also been recovered from the interior of the hillfort (FIG. 5, #4).

In contrast to this dense scatter of occupation debris near the presumed entrance to the hillfort, sampling of surface scatters over the entire spur has produced only very sporadic finds of domestic stone-work debris (variously abraded and fire-cracked pebbles, gritstone fragments, some derived from saddle querns). Such

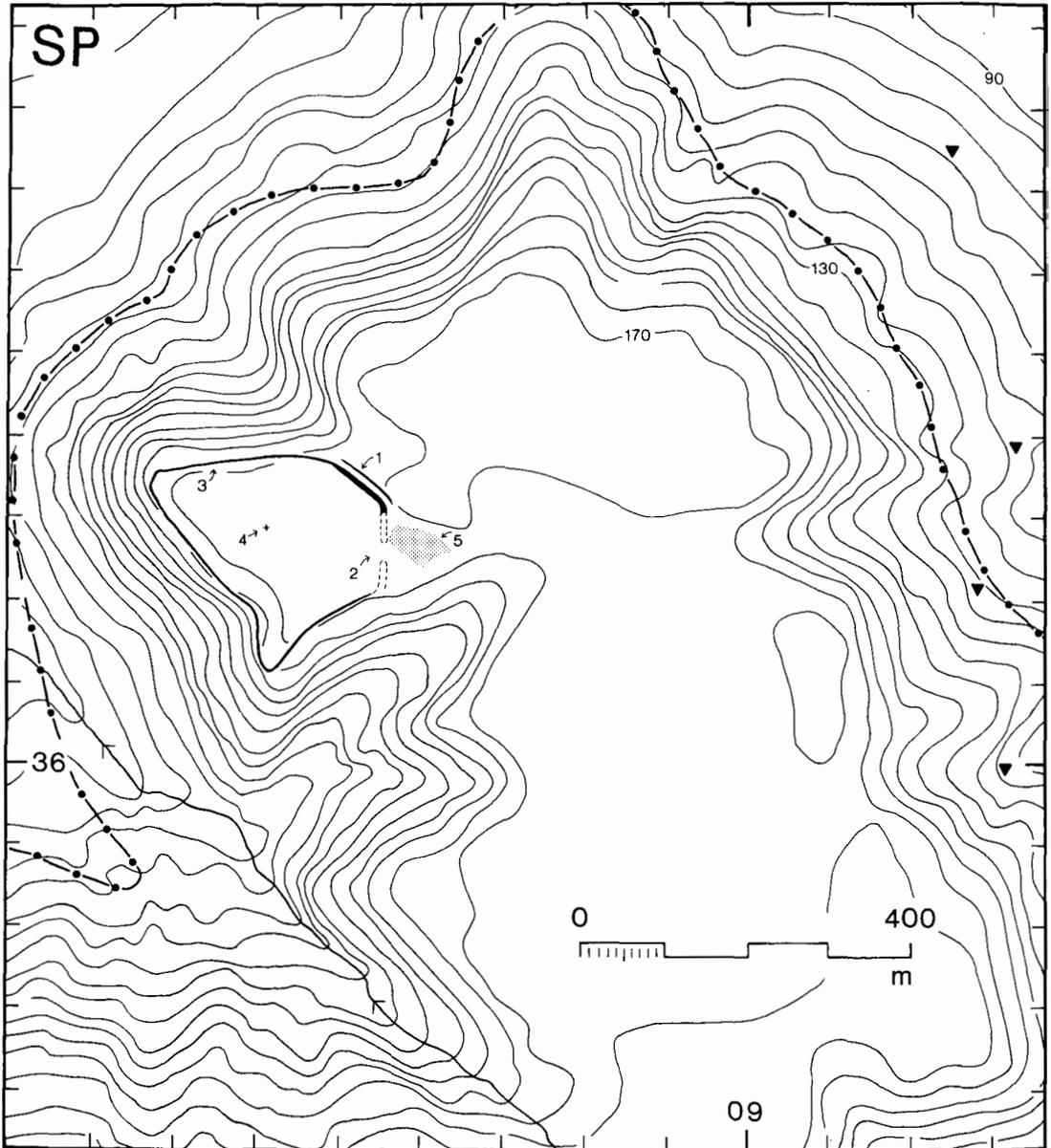


FIG. 5 The hillfort at Burhill and its immediate area. National grid lines and a 100 m scale are shown at the margin. Metric contours are shown. The dotted line represents the base of the Middle Lias, an important spring-line. Springs are represented by inverted triangles. Specific features are numbered as follows:

- 1 surviving length of univallate rampart and external ditch;
- 2 possible entrance gap in an eroded length of the rampart which cuts off the tip of the spur;
- 3 possible line of rampart visible in places as a sight bank at the top of the hill-slope;
- 4 complete saddle quern recovered as a surface find;
- 5 dense surface scatter of iron age pottery, a sample of which is described in this paper.

items, although undated, are of prehistoric type and are typical of the range of material recovered from interiors and peripheries of other hillforts elsewhere in the Cotswolds (unpublished field-work). Since Roman occupation has not yet been detected in the immediate area, certainly not from the ploughed top of the spur, these finds are best seen as derived from the occupation of the hillfort itself.

Although there is no evidence from surface finds for post-iron age activity or settlement on the spur, the area of the hillfort itself has produced evidence of pre-iron age activity in the form of a grade 2 flint scatter (definition in Marshall 1985). This scatter occurs over approximately 1 ha centred on SP 08603625 and contrasts with the rest of the spur, over which the density of surface flint is negligible. This grade 2 scatter is almost devoid of well-produced flakes and implements and as such is probably best interpreted in terms of activity rather than settlement. Pre-iron age activity at similar hillfort sites is suggested by the occurrence of flint scatters at Roel (SP 04902440) and ?Salter's Hill (SP 04502860), but not at Shenberrow (SP 08053345).

Details of the pottery from Burhill

The sample of pottery contained vessels of two main types: situlate jars and carinated bowls. Minor types are included as a residual group of other bowl/jar forms. The sample of pottery falls entirely within the Shenberrow-Chastleton assemblage dating from the earliest iron age, and consequently shows strong ceramic affinities with the upper Thames valley (Marshall 1978).

A representative range of examples is illustrated in FIG. 6 as follows:

1-8 *Fragments of situlate jars*. Forms with everted rims recurved at the tip are represented (1,2), including examples of considerable diameter. Other types with upright (4), or gently everted rims (3) also occur. Bands of decoration or plain/decorated cordons frequently occur at the neck (1,5,6) or shoulder (4,7,8). Decoration consists of repetitive finger-nail (1,4,7,8), or finger-tip impressions (not illustrated), diagonal slash marks (6), or applied cordons can be left undecorated (5). All fabric 2.

9-16 *Fragments of carinated bowls*. Forms with gently everted rims (9,10,14,16) and sharply carinated shoulders (11,12,13,15) are represented. Several fragments (15) suggest that some of the bowls were unusually small. Decoration, when present, consists of incised hatching (9), or burnished lines (12,13). Several fragments (not illustrated) have haematite slip applied over internal and external surfaces. All fabric 5, except examples 12 and 16 which are of fabrics 3 and 1 respectively. Micaceous fabric 5, which predominates in this group, may be non-local and represent imported wares. The occasional appearance of carinated bowl forms in other fabrics (12 and 16) may represent local copies.

17 *Other bowl/jar forms*. Although situlate jars and carinated bowls dominate the sample, occasional fragments of other types do occur. The example illustrated represents a rounded bowl with a short everted, but not beaded, rim. Fabric 1.

All vessels are hand-made and the fabrics can be classified into 5 main types as follows:

Fabric 1

Matrix: uniformly black in colour over internal and external surfaces and within the section. Some irregularity in firing produced occasional patches of brown within the black.

Filler: high levels of crushed white shell filler occur within the section and at the surface. Granules are generally flattened and 1-4 mm in length.

Hardness: friable, flaking along the line of granules of shell filler.

Surface: unburnished but relatively smooth, with wipe-marks from final preparation of the external and internal surfaces. Shell filler is very visible at the surface.

Thickness of fragments: 6-13 mm.

Type of vessel: large situlate jars, including examples with angled shoulders and everted necks. Decorated examples appear infrequently but one fragment of a large jar with a single, shallow, rounded groove, 5 mm wide and 1 mm deep, does occur in the sample.

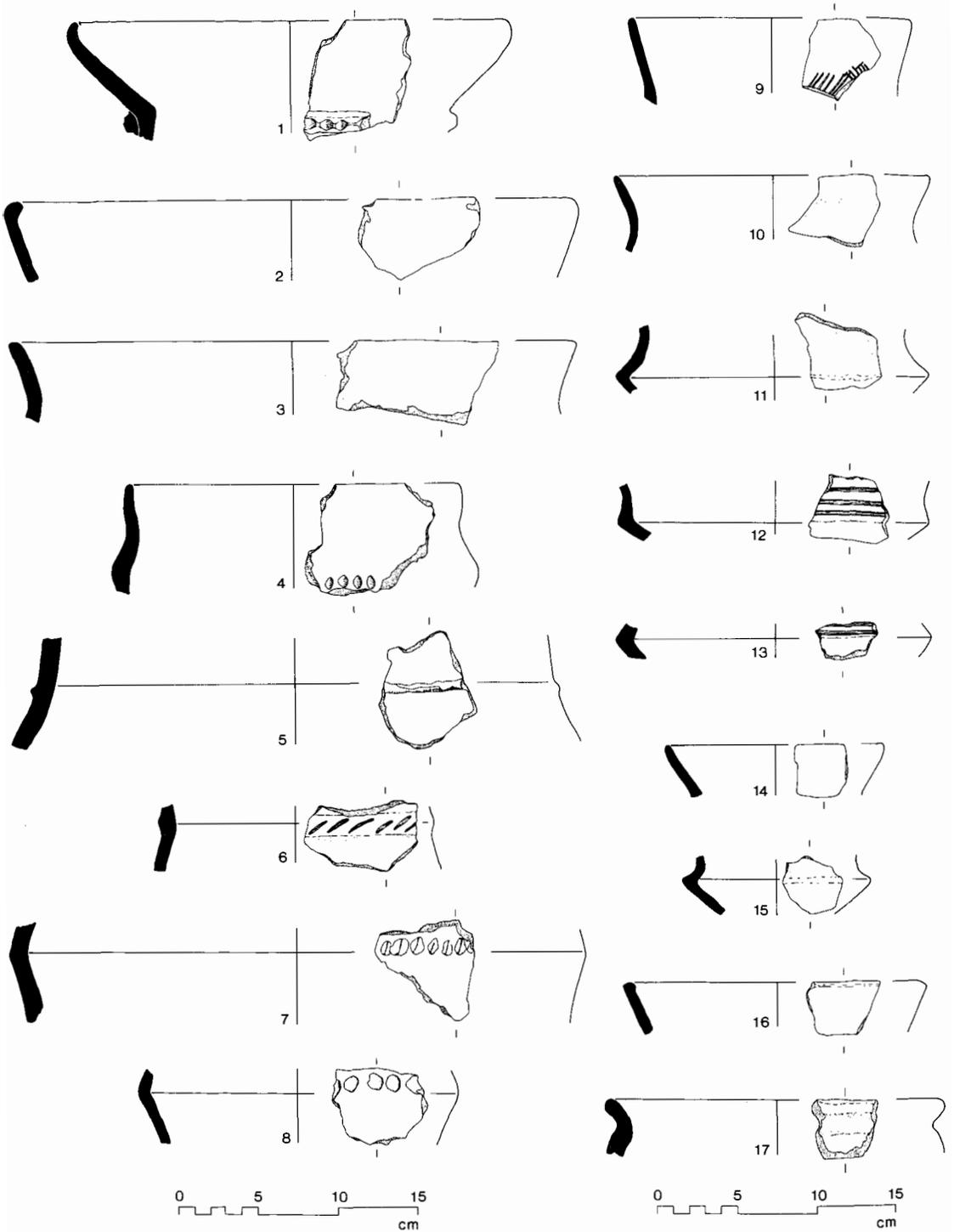


FIG. 6 Iron age pottery from the surface scatter near the entrance to the hillfort at Burhill. Scale 1:4.

Comments: appears to be a deliberate variant or less well-fired version of fabric 2, which is generally reddish in colour because of its higher firing-temperature. The forms of vessel appear similar in both fabrics.

Fabric 2

Matrix: exterior surfaces and sections are red/brown, light brown, or buff-yellow. Interior surfaces are usually darker than this, generally grey to black, especially when the fragment derives from the body of the vessel where increased reducing conditions pertained during firing. Patchy colouration of surfaces indicates non-uniform firing temperatures.

Filler: as fabric 1.

Hardness: the redder, more oxidized fabric caused by higher firing-temperatures confers greater hardness.

Surface: as fabric 1.

Thickness of fragments: as fabric 1.

Type of vessel: situlate jars, as fabric 1, but the incidence of decorated fragments appears to be higher, although this may be fortuitous. Examples of situlate jars occur with decoration at the shoulder/neck in the form of a narrow band of diagonal slashing, a narrow band of upright finger-tip/nail impressions, or an applied cordon with vertical finger-nail impressions.

Comments: probably a higher-temperature variant of fabric 1.

Fabric 3

Matrix: relatively uniform grey/black in section and at the surface. Some examples occur with patchy black surfaces and some with red bands within the section, indicating variable firing.

Filler: contains a lower concentration of filler than fabric 1. The filler is crushed shell or limestone with smaller, more rounded granules <2 mm in mean diameter.

Hardness: higher firing-temperature and smaller size of filler confer greater hardness than fabric 1.

Surface: not burnished, but wipe-marks from final finishing are visible, and pock-marks occur where grains of filler are absent, leaving holes. Some examples are smoothed, and where the level of filler is slight, are relatively fine, hard fabrics.

Thickness of fragments: ~ 7 mm.

Type of vessel: smaller situlate jars and carinated bowls.

Fabric 4

Matrix: uniformly orange in section and at the surfaces.

Filler: low levels of finely granular crushed limestone.

Hardness: similar hardness to fabric 3, far harder than fabrics 1 and 2.

Surface: matt, relatively smooth but pock-marked where grains of filler have been removed.

Slip: examples occur with red haematite slip over interior and exterior surfaces.

Thickness of fragments: ~ 8 mm.

Type of vessel: carinated bowls, and smaller bowl/jar forms with everted rims.

Fabric 5

Matrix: grey/black throughout the section and at surfaces, with some tendency for patchiness of colour at the surface. There is a highly characteristic sparkle over all surfaces caused by fine grains of mica in the matrix.

Filler: none is visible in some examples, but others contain low levels of crushed shell.

Hardness: similar in hardness to fabric 3, but far harder than fabrics 1 and 2.

Surface: matt, smoothed, with some pock-marking where grains of filler have been removed.

Slip: examples occur with red haematite slip over interior and exterior surfaces.

Thickness of fragments: ~ 7 mm.

Type of vessel: carinated bowls.

The relative abundance of different fabrics within a 4.6 kg sample is as follows:

<i>Fabric</i>	<i>% by weight</i>
1	12.7
2	61.4
3	5.7
4	1.3
5	19.0

Discussion

The earliest iron age in the Cotswolds (phase 1: Marshall 1978; review in Saville 1984) appears from the limited evidence available to be represented by a fairly homogeneous assemblage of structures and ceramic elements. These occur in various combinations at a range of hillforts and open settlements, but to a maximum extent at the hillforts of Shenberrow, Glos. (SP 08053345) and Chastleton, Oxon. (SP 25872822). This Shenberrow-Chastleton assemblage seems to be defined by smaller hillforts (c. 1–4 ha: see Marshall 1978, table 1) and, with an internal area of 3–4 ha, Burhill is within this range.

The ceramic component of the Shenberrow-Chastleton assemblage comprises two clearly-defined groups: larger situlate jars of coarser, gritted fabric, frequently with finger-nail/tip decoration and a second, less frequent group of smaller carinated bowls of finer fabric, often with an applied haematite slip. The general assemblage does not appear to include examples of ceramics with incised and white-infilled decoration, which occur on other sites of the earliest phase of the iron age further south in the Cotswolds, at hillforts such as Crickley Hill (SO 92701613), and Leckhampton (SO 94821838), and at open settlements such as Sandy Lane (SO 95461972), although incised fragments of carinated bowl do occur at Burhill (FIG. 6, #9). Such wares appear to increase in frequency in areas further south along the scarp and to represent another ceramic component within this earliest phase of the iron age. The ceramic assemblage at Burhill is entirely typical of the Shenberrow-Chastleton assemblage, and it comprises a very extensive, important, and anomalously well-preserved sample.

Many hillfort sites in the northern Cotswolds, such as Leckhampton and Shenberrow, which have produced material from the earliest phase of the iron age, appear to produce little obvious evidence of later occupation as shown by pottery attributable to the mid/late iron age Salmonsbury-Broadway or Bredon Hill-Danes Camp assemblages/phases (phases 2 and 3: Marshall 1978). In this respect the hillfort at Burhill appears to be no exception; no pottery of the later iron age appearing in any of the finds made to date.

Burhill is therefore significant in that it appears, on the basis of current evidence, to be a typical univallate hillfort of Shenberrow-Chastleton type, representing settlement during the earliest phases of the iron age in the northern Cotswolds and showing clear ceramic links with the earliest iron age of the upper Thames valley. It exemplifies the general lack of data on the origin, extent, nature, and evolution of settlement during the earliest iron age and underlines the need for further work. Burhill is especially relevant in a conservation sense in that alone among the group of hillforts probably attributable to this early phase in the Cotswolds it is undergoing continuous annual erosion from ploughing. The relative richness of surface finds which this erosion has produced suggests the existence of a productive and important site.

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